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ABSTRACT

The College Readiness Policy Connections initiative is part of the effort by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to spotlight student preparation for college and careers. The initiative examines the educational spectrum from early schooling to entry into college and focuses on the policies that are necessary to sustain students' academic achievement along the way. This report lays out a policy framework for states with particular attention to the needs of students and parents. It looks at six themes identified as essential for college readiness: (1) curriculum and standards; (2) assessment and accountability; (3) educational support systems; (4) qualified professional staff; (5) community and parental partnerships; and (6) facilities, equipment, and instructional materials. Questions that must be answered in each of these areas are outlined. These questions demonstrate the complexity of educational reform as they outline the work that must be undertaken. (SLD)

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Student Readiness for College:

Connecting State Policies

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COLLEGE READINESS SERIES

This college readiness series report was prepared by Joan M. Lord, director of college readiness policy connections.

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Student Readiness for College

The Southern Regional Education Board's *Educational Benchmarks* initiative (1988 to 2000) helped states track their progress on 12 important educational goals. The *Benchmarks 2000* report celebrated Southern states for their impressive gains in student achievement, which sometimes even surpassed gains by the rest of the nation. The report, however, concluded that the region still has not caught up on most measures of student achievement. The findings on students' readiness for and access to college are particularly disconcerting and raise important questions.

- ***Do too few students in your state attend college?***
- ***Do too many students need remediation when they go to college?***
- ***Is the drop out rate in high school and college too high?***
- ***What issues should you address to ensure progress for your state?***

The College Readiness Policy Connections initiative is part of SREB's effort to spotlight student preparation for college and careers. The initiative examines the educational spectrum — from early schooling to entry into college — and focuses on the policies that are necessary to sustain students' academic achievement all along the way. The purpose of this initiative is to help states identify policy gaps and weaknesses and ensure that policies are aligned and mutually supportive.

This report lays out a policy framework for states, with particular attention to the needs of students and parents. It looks at many aspects of college readiness, including strong curricula, quality teachers, assessment and accountability, educational support programs, and early information about college for young students.

SREB is working with three partner states — Georgia, Texas and West Virginia — in this initiative, but the analyses will include all 16 SREB states. The hope is that this work will lead to greater student achievement in your state and in every SREB state.

Mark Musick
President

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Student Readiness for College:

Connecting State Policies

A long way to go

Despite significant gains during the 1990s, educational reform has not improved student achievement as much as expected — or needed. Many reports from other organizations corroborate the findings of SREB's decade-long *Educational Benchmarks* effort.* The bottom line in all of these reports is clear: We have a long way to go!

- Too many students still drop out of high school.
- Too little progress has been made in closing achievement gaps for all groups of students.
- Too few students go to college, and too few students and parents know what they need to do to prepare adequately for college.
- Too few students — particularly among those in vocational and technical studies — take a rigorous high school curriculum, and the senior year of high school often is not used productively.
- Too few schools provide tutorial and other intervention programs to help struggling students catch up to their peers and stay in step.
- Too few teachers have the skills to bring all their students to acceptable levels of academic achievement, and too few teachers stress active learning and problem-solving.

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* See the sidebar on page 4.

- Too often teachers are not qualified to teach the subject matter they are assigned to teach.
- Too few schools are linked in meaningful ways to businesses or community organizations.
- Too little progress has been made in identifying how technology can improve student achievement and teaching efficiency.
- Too few college students are preparing to become teachers, particularly in certain geographic and subject areas, and too many new teachers quit within a few years.
- Too many gaps in the curriculum at key transition points impede student progress: from elementary to middle grades, from middle grades to high school and from high school to college.

Need for a policy framework

Many reform efforts have failed because they have been undertaken piecemeal, according to the National Commission on the High School Senior Year. Some education analysts attribute the failure to the way education agencies and programs are structured. As "silos," they are separate and windowless. They permit no interaction or communication! These critics charge that states do not always coordinate federal programs with the states' own educational efforts. Often, two similar federal programs are awarded to one state, but their efforts are not aligned. For example, rarely do federal Upward Bound grants, federal Gear Up grants and a state's early-outreach program work together. Likewise, it is not typical for a state's Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement grant to be coordinated fully with programs to prepare students for college.

The complex process of developing comprehensive approaches to policy necessarily involves many agencies, programs and funding sources, and it requires a precarious balance of many variables. As one education leader in Texas has noted, many efforts to improve student readiness for college are themselves "high-risk" and may create unintended problems. For example, raising the standards for teacher licensure may discourage some potential teachers from attempting to qualify, particularly in relatively challenging areas with the greatest shortages, such as mathematics, science, special education and foreign languages. Raising standards for high school graduation or college admission may motivate some students to take a more rigorous curriculum, but it may cause a significant proportion to drop out of school. Moreover, the students encouraged by such policies to pursue higher-level courses generally take additional courses in mathematics, science and foreign languages — disciplines that

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Key national reform efforts

Organization	Web site
American Council on Education: College is Possible Campaign	www.collegeispossible.org
Annenberg Institute for School Reform	www.annenberginstitute.org
BellSouth Foundation: High School Reform and Teaching Quality Initiatives	www.bellsouthfoundation.org/grants/si/index.html
Council for Basic Education: Standards-based Teacher Education Project	www.c-b-e.org/teachered/intro.htm
The College Board: Blue Ribbon Student Financial Aid Panel	www.collegeboard.com/press/html0102/html/020301.html
CRESPAR: Talent Development High Schools	www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/crespar.html
Education Trust: K-16 efforts	www.edtrust.org/main/what.asp
Lumina Foundation for Education: *Unequal Opportunity: Disparities in College Access Among the 50 States*	www.luminafoundation.org
The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education: *Measuring Up 2000*	www.highereducation.org
National Commission on the High School Senior Year	www.commissiononthesenioryear.org
NCREL: *Small by Design: Resizing America's High Schools*	www.ncrel.org/policy/pubs/html/smbydes/index.htm
NSF: Rural Systemic Initiatives and Urban Systemic Program	www.ehr.nsf.gov/esr/programs/
Pathways to College	www.pathwaystocollege.net
Rural School and Community Trust	www.ruraledu.org
SHEEO: K-16 Projects	www.sheeo.org
SREB: *High Schools That Work*, Making Middle Grades Work	www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/hstwindex.asp

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already are experiencing teacher shortages. The need for more courses in these fields could create staffing difficulties for administrators. Stronger efforts in guidance, intervention, assessment and data collection may increase student achievement significantly, but they also certainly will increase the front-end costs of education. And, ironically, success in increasing college readiness and motivating more students to apply to colleges could strain the capacity and resources of colleges and universities to accommodate the students who qualify.

From the student's perspective

The first step in achieving an integrated policy framework is getting the big picture without losing sight of students. Identifying what typical third-, fifth-, seventh- or ninth-graders need in order to be prepared for college helps bring focus to issues regarding college readiness and student achievement. The focus becomes sharper when the needs of students who are not on track for college are identified — particularly if these students do not realize that they are falling short. In fact, far too many students are not on track and they likely do not know it. The low proportion of students who achieve proficiency status on the National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrates that most students are not on track. Policy-makers and educators must ask, "What do students need, when do they need it, and how can we make it available to them?"

No matter how difficult it is to develop policy frameworks for educational reform, it is imperative. Cookie-cutter solutions that would make all schools identical are neither reasonable nor desirable. Instead, each state needs an interconnected policy framework that recognizes the relationships among curriculum, assessment, teacher quality, facilities and parental engagement. It also should make the educational pathways that students follow as straight and smooth as possible. And it should use resources from various sources — federal, state, local, business, philanthropic — efficiently to meet goals. Such a framework will allow each school and school system to help every student reach proficiency. Paying attention to the individual needs of students and helping parents help their children will ensure that the varied needs of all students are met and that no child is left behind.

SREB's College Readiness Policy Connections and its three partner states (Georgia, Texas and West Virginia) have identified 24 student needs associated with college readiness. Divided into six categories, they represent common themes from broad, ongoing national studies and state discussions about student readiness for college.

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What Students and Parents Need in Order to Prepare for College

Curriculum and Standards	Related Topics
1. Coherent, connected curriculum; clear performance standards, aligned from level to level, that focus on readiness for the next level	■ Emphasis on the senior year ■ Alignment of curriculum in teacher preparation programs with K-12 standards and assessments ■ Alignment of college-preparatory standards with colleges' placement requirements
2. Rigorous curriculum and high expectations for all students at every level	
3. Engaging, challenging instructional methods that promote analysis, multistep problem-solving, creativity and inquiry	
4. Curriculum with a real-world, career-oriented perspective that motivates students	

Assessment and Accountability	Related Topics
5. Regular, timely assessment of student achievement that is aligned with standards and ensures that students are ready for transitions (elementary to middle to high school and then to college)	■ Early identification of students with deficiencies ■ Linked student database to monitor student progress from preschool to college ■ Report card on the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs
6. Regular, timely assessment of school performance based on student achievement	
7. Educational framework that promotes the continuous academic growth of students and improvement of their schools	

Educational Support Systems	Related Topics
8. Academic safety nets, including tutorials, counseling, summer programs and after-school programs	■ Guidance in strengthening deficient knowledge and skills ■ School schedule and calendar ■ Feedback reports from colleges to high schools ■ Bridge programs to assist in the transition from high school to college ■ Feedback to students and parents about assessment results and readiness for college ■ Availability of financial aid, including grants and loans ■ Early counseling about financial aid
9. Individualized academic plan that provides long-range educational and career planning	
10. Information throughout K-12 about educational pathways and contacts regarding financial aid, college admissions and the expectations of various careers	
11. Support for schools that do not meet expectations	
12. Assistance for students and parents to resolve students' personal barriers to academic achievement	
13. Time on task — few interruptions, focus on learning	
14. Affordable postsecondary education	

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Qualified Professional Staff	Related Topics
15. Access to qualified teachers: • recruitment • preparation/education • ongoing professional development • licensure • evaluation 16. Teachers who work within and across grade levels to promote a coherent curriculum 17. School leaders, particularly principals and counselors, who focus on improving student achievement	■ Support programs for beginning teachers ■ Incentives for retaining high-quality teachers, including better working conditions and incentives for teachers to obtain advanced certification ■ Alignment of standards for teacher licensure with K-12 standards and assessments ■ "In-field" teaching ■ Involvement of arts and sciences faculty in teacher preparation
Community and Parental Partnerships	**Related Topics**
18. Ties to the community through businesses and local government 19. Involved, informed parents who help their children make good choices about education and careers 20. Alliances among elementary, middle and high schools and alliances between K-12 and higher education	■ Parents who understand information about student assessment and know what courses are needed to prepare for college ■ Businesses that know how to be engaged meaningfully with schools ■ Coordination with local agencies (including health and public safety agencies)
Facilities, Equipment and Instructional Materials	**Related Topics**
21. Safe environment, with mutual respect among teachers and students 22. Smaller classes, smaller schools or smaller learning communities (schools within schools) 23. Appropriate, sufficient, challenging materials, including computer software 24. High-quality facilities, including technology and laboratories	■ Programs to reduce crime, violence and other social detriments to learning ■ Technologies that are integrated into the curriculum and used to improve student achievement

College Readiness Policy Connections, Southern Regional Education Board, 2002. Contact Joan M. Lord at joan.lord@sreb.org.

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Policy-makers should keep all 24 of these needs in mind as they work to link state programs and policies to improve students' academic achievement. They should determine:

- what programs, initiatives or funding structures will have the greatest impact in the most areas;
- where gaps in policy impede student achievement;
- how to coordinate federal (and other) resources with state resources to meet state goals;
- what preliminary policy efforts will provide the greatest long-term gain; and
- what negative effects might result from various policy options and how to overcome them.

Policy-makers also need to consider how budget cuts will affect all 24 student needs. Deep cuts in one area (for example, professional development for teachers) might compromise the effectiveness of other initiatives (curriculum reform, use of technology, early outreach to students and parents).

Making policy connections: Asking the right questions

Because the six themes that make up the policy framework are interdependent, they present distinct challenges for policy-makers. Every state must address each theme without losing sight of the other five themes and the greater goal of a student's educational pathway. The following questions are designed to highlight specific issues related to each of the six themes and to show how the areas overlap. By answering these questions seriously, states can make progress in connecting policies.

Curriculum and Standards

- ***Can students who master the work at one educational level safely assume that they are ready for the work at the next level?***
  - ✓ Does the state recommend an educational program for preschools that ensures their curricula are aligned with the first-grade curriculum?
  - ✓ Is a student who masters the work in the last grades of elementary school ready for the curriculum of the middle grades? Is a student who masters the middle grades curriculum ready for high school?

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- ✓ Are high school graduation standards rigorous enough to prepare students for postsecondary education and careers? Can students who successfully complete a college-preparatory curriculum take college-level courses without remediation?
- ✓ Does state policy require that curriculum developers plan for the entire curricular span — preschool through college — so as to create smooth transitions for students?
- ✓ Do teacher education programs and professional development stress the full span of the curriculum so that teachers know what they can expect from students and what they must prepare students to know and do?
- ✓ Do new teachers receive help in implementing the standards, and do veteran teachers receive help in implementing changes in the standards?

◆ ***Is the curriculum challenging and rigorous, including the curriculum for the senior year in high school?***

- ✓ Are all students encouraged to take rigorous courses, including science subjects and mathematics courses beyond Algebra I?
- ✓ Do graduation requirements and college admission standards motivate students to use the senior year fully to prepare for college and careers?
- ✓ Does the state promote Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and dual enrollment opportunities to prepare juniors and seniors for smooth transitions to college?
- ✓ Does the curriculum engage students in multistep problem-solving and hands-on learning? Does it challenge them to apply what they learn to everyday situations?
- ✓ Are teachers apprised of curriculum changes and assessment results so they can adjust their teaching methods?
- ✓ Does the state or school system help teachers "calibrate" their content and teaching methods with current standards, so that students receive grade-level instruction and make a full year's progress in a school year?
- ✓ Are state standards as rigorous as national standards and, when available, international standards?

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Assessment and Accountability

- ***Are assessment measures appropriately aligned with curriculum standards?***
  - ✓ Does the state ensure that student assessments measure whether students have achieved the state's academic standards?
  - ✓ If the assessment tests are not customized for the state's standards, do they reflect the state's standards sufficiently? Are differences between the content of the tests and the state's standards explained when the tests are interpreted?
  - ✓ If students score well on assessment tests in the last grades of elementary school, are they ready for the middle school curriculum? Do middle grades assessments predict readiness for high school? Do high school assessments measure college readiness?
  - ✓ Does the state have linked data systems so that student progress can be monitored throughout all educational levels? Does the state use the data to provide schools with feedback on the performance of their former students?

- ***Do individual results sufficiently identify student deficiencies so that corrective strategies can be identified?***
  - ✓ Does the state require that parents and students receive assessment results in formats that they can understand?
  - ✓ Are the results and recommendations specific enough to allow teachers and parents to identify strategies to help individual students?
  - ✓ Can school counselors use the results in recommending strategies beyond the classroom to help students achieve their academic potential?

- ***Has the state established high — yet fair — accountability standards for schools?***
  - ✓ Are schools required to show continuous improvement in student achievement and to have plans for attaining it?
  - ✓ Does the state ensure that schools with high percentages of "at-risk" students have the resources necessary for student success?
  - ✓ Are the consequences for habitually low-performing schools designed to promote school reform and student choice? Do they provide safeguards so that students are not penalized for the failings of their schools?

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- ***Are teacher education programs held accountable for their graduates?***
  - ✓ Are the assessments of new teachers shared with teacher education programs?
  - ✓ Has the state established quality standards for teacher education programs?
  - ✓ Are teacher education programs required to continue working with their graduates, particularly beginning teachers who perform poorly on assessments?

Educational Support Systems

- ***Are support systems available for low-performing students and schools?***
  - ✓ Are remedial efforts implemented in such a way that K-12 students can continue with the regular curriculum? Can students catch up on skills in which they are deficient without falling farther behind their classmates?
  - ✓ What specific support is provided to students making the transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school? What support is given to high school seniors who are not ready for college or careers?
  - ✓ Are schools required to identify and organize community resources to provide students with extra help?
  - ✓ Do programs to reduce truancy and dropout rates have adequate funding to be effective?
  - ✓ Do low-performing schools have access to additional financial and other resources to implement student support systems?
  - ✓ Are parents engaged in finding solutions at low-performing schools?
- ***Are students and their parents encouraged to develop long-range academic plans?***
  - ✓ Do parents and students know about the academic requirements for the next level of schooling? Are they aware of what they need to know and be able to do before they enroll in college?
  - ✓ Do parents know about the costs of higher education and opportunities for financial aid?
  - ✓ Do counselors have time to help students and their parents develop academic plans, or do administrative duties consume most of their time?

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- ***Are students given incentives to prepare for college?***
  - ✓ Has the state developed outreach programs to encourage students as early as fifth grade to prepare for college? Has the state coordinated state and federal funding for outreach and support programs to maximize the results?
  - ✓ Does the state monitor the percentages of low-, middle- and high-income families' resources that are required to send students to public colleges? Does this information influence decisions about tuition and fees?
  - ✓ Does the state have a financial aid plan that balances need-based and merit-based aid and that coordinates federal, state and private resources? Are there scholarships or grants to encourage students to enter high-demand occupations (such as nursing or teaching mathematics)?

- ***Do schools recognize time as a key resource and use it well?***
  - ✓ Are the school day and school year the right lengths to promote student achievement?
  - ✓ Does the schedule give teachers time for reflection, planning and professional development?
  - ✓ Does the schedule give students time to work with counselors and, periodically, to work individually with their teachers?
  - ✓ Are all school personnel committed to more "time on task" and thus fewer interruptions during instruction?
  - ✓ Is homework used effectively to advance student performance?

Qualified Professional Staff

- ***Does the state recruit enough teachers, particularly in high-demand subjects, such as mathematics, science, foreign languages and special education?***
  - ✓ Does the state provide attractive scholarships and salary schedules to encourage students to pursue careers in teaching?
  - ✓ Do early outreach programs promote teaching as a career?
  - ✓ Are the working conditions and workplaces attractive to those who are comparing teaching with other career options?

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- ***Do teacher education programs and professional development set rigorous requirements, and do these requirements reflect the state's educational standards and goals?***

  - ✓ Do teacher education programs ensure that all teachers, principals and superintendents are firmly grounded in and committed to the state's content standards?
  - ✓ Are faculty members in arts and sciences required to participate with teacher educators as full partners in teacher education programs in order to ensure that future teachers have strong content knowledge as well as teaching skills?
  - ✓ Are teacher preparation programs required to provide significant field-based experiences?
  - ✓ Does the state offer professional-development opportunities for teachers and provide compelling incentives for teachers to participate in them? Does the state encourage teachers to earn certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards? Are there incentives to urge teachers to work in subject or geographic areas in which there are teacher shortages?
  - ✓ Do the state and the schools systems coordinate federal and state funds to enhance teacher quality?

- ***Are licensure and evaluation requirements for teachers and principals tied to their understanding of the state's academic standards, and do these requirements ensure that teachers are able to help all students achieve the standards?***

  - ✓ Do licensure requirements stipulate that teachers must have content knowledge in the subjects they teach — including reading and mathematics for elementary teachers?
  - ✓ Are new teachers monitored to ensure that they base their educational practices on the state's academic standards?
  - ✓ Are renewal licenses and merit increases for teachers tied to student achievement?
  - ✓ Has technology (such as distance education) been used to provide students with access to highly qualified teachers in virtual classrooms, particularly in subjects for which teachers are in short supply? Are these virtual classrooms supported by facilitators in schools?

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- ***Do teachers work together to develop a coherent curriculum?***
  - ✓ Do teachers of the same grade level have adequate time to meet together regularly in interdisciplinary teams to reflect on students' progress and to coordinate instructional plans?
  - ✓ Are teachers in a particular discipline — across grade levels, but especially at transition points (the end of elementary, middle or high school) — able to meet together to ensure that the subject curriculum is coherent and that students' transitions will be as smooth as possible?

- ***Are school leaders, particularly principals and counselors, able to support their schools' academic mission to promote student achievement?***
  - ✓ Are principals trained to be instructional leaders, and do they observe classroom activities and interact with teachers about student progress?
  - ✓ Do principals and counselors actively seek to engage parents in students' educational progress? Do they help parents and students develop and monitor academic and career plans?
  - ✓ Do counselors actively identify and respond to individual students' academic deficiencies and social barriers?

Community and Parental Partnerships

- ***Do state school agencies and local school systems have formal ties with the business community?***
  - ✓ Have businesses been encouraged to bring their resources (personnel, expertise, time and funding) to schools and school districts in significant ways that go beyond "adopting" schools?
  - ✓ Does the state regularly ask business leaders to assess the preparation of recent high school and college graduates? Are business groups regularly briefed about educational policies and student performance?
  - ✓ Have businesses been encouraged to allow their employees to be active in their children's schools?

- ***Are parents encouraged to be engaged in their children's education?***
  - ✓ Are schools required to structure ways for parents to participate, including attendance at meetings of the school and parent organization, conferences

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with teachers and counselors, attendance at student performances, and work as volunteers?

- ✓ Are parents encouraged to help their children with homework? Do parents receive assistance in these efforts, such as help in guiding their children to high-quality reading materials?
- ✓ Do parents help select their children's coursework, and are their opinions respected?

Facilities, Equipment and Instructional Materials

- ◆ ***Do school and class sizes support student achievement?***
  - ✓ Do school systems provide incentives for schools to create smaller learning communities within schools?
  - ✓ Does funding allow for student-to-teacher ratios that support student achievement?
- ◆ ***Does the school provide every student with stimulating, challenging materials?***
  - ✓ Are text materials and software current and aligned with content standards?
  - ✓ Is every school's media center supplied with current, stimulating and attractive materials that are appropriate for the grade levels within the school?
  - ✓ Do K-12 schools and colleges coordinate library/media holdings to promote smooth transitions? For example, do high school libraries include books recommended for students preparing for college, and are students frequently encouraged to read these materials?
- ◆ ***Are high-quality facilities available to every student?***
  - ✓ Do all students have access to grade-level-appropriate laboratories for both academic and vocational work?
  - ✓ Do all classrooms have access to computer technology, including Internet connections and e-mail? Do all students have access to this technology?
  - ✓ Are school personnel required regularly to review emergency plans with local police, fire, rescue and medical personnel? Are drills reviewed for procedural compliance, and do school personnel and students receive feedback about the drills? Are federal programs and funding coordinated with the state's efforts to maximize school safety?

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Final observations

This list of questions is long but by no means exhaustive. It demonstrates the complexity of educational reform and outlines the work that must be undertaken to help our nation's young people achieve their potential. Most education leaders and policy-makers readily admit gaps in their own policies, and they know that better connections are needed in areas for which policies exist. This situation raises one final set of questions that likely needs answers before any of the previous ones:

- ***Who has the overall, everyday responsibility for the "big picture" in education? In other words, who's in charge of cutting windows into the silos and building bridges to connect them?***
  - ✓ Who can bring together and foster strong working relationships among those responsible for curriculum design, support systems, licensing, assessment, and teacher recruitment and preparation?
  - ✓ Who can ensure that there are smooth grade-to-grade transitions in the curriculum, particularly at key points (elementary to middle school, middle to high school, high school to college)?
  - ✓ Who can work with education, business and community leaders to ensure a common vision for and commitment to the state's schools?
  - ✓ Who can make the case for additional funding needed for buildings, technology, salaries and incentives at all levels of education?
  - ✓ Who can develop a compelling state strategy to attract federal and philanthropic funding for education?
  - ✓ Who can work to consolidate funding "across agency lines" to achieve mutual goals?
  - ✓ Who can tie the state's assessment and accountability data to policy analysis and development?

These questions are not meant to imply that one person should be responsible for all of these tasks. In some states, an education secretary in the governor's cabinet oversees a staff that works with leaders of various agencies. Some states have established ongoing "blue-ribbon" commissions or K-16 councils that make recommendations to state agencies. Still others undertake this work through coordinating boards. In any case, each state needs to designate some office or group to be responsible for streamlining and coordinating educational policies, or educational "silos" will continue to defy the good will and hard work of many people.

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